

Notes for MARAC round-table session on LGBT History Projects

By Barry Loveland

Overview of LGBT Center of Central PA History Project

- Mission: to engage people in discovering, documenting, preserving and presenting the history of the LGBT community of central PA through oral histories and material culture.
- We do this because LGBT history has been largely overlooked or marginalized by most historical institutions; LGBT people tend not to give much thought or importance to documenting their own history; and some people even actively destroy this history. Yet it is a history that is not only important to the LGBT community, but fits into a national story of the human rights movements that grew out of the mid-20th century and about which more is created every day.
- We are a mostly volunteer-run project, with two staff of the LGBT Center that provide a small amount of their time in support of our project; a staff person at the Dickinson Archives and Special Collections who provides a portion of her time in support of the project; and student interns.
- We are organized with a steering committee with a chairperson, and coordinators of the following areas of work: oral history interviewing, transcription, archives, presentation, outreach, and fund-raising.
- The Stats: We have been in existence for a little over 3 years. We have completed about 75 interviews and about 50 transcriptions and collected several dozen cubic feet of archival documents and artifacts. We have a waiting list of nearly 100 people waiting to be interviewed. We have an email list of more than 200 who are actively interested in following our project. We have presented seven exhibits and 9 programs and have a web page. We have hosted about a dozen student interns from five colleges and universities. We have worked with three college classes doing individual student projects using our collections for research, or doing oral histories for our project.

Impact on LGBT Community

- Interest has been strong in the LGBT community. Attendance at exhibit openings has ranged from about 75 to 125; and attendance at programs ranges from about 25 to 60. There is a lot of interest in sharing stories – at least 170 people who have either been interviewed or want to be interviewed (and these numbers grow every year).
- There is a permanent exhibit and changing exhibit case in the LGBT Center which provides a constant presence of history in the life of the community.
- And people keep asking for more – they want to see the oral history videos or video clips, they ask if we are planning a book/publications; they want to see more of the artifact, and

they want more content on the web. It has acquired a sort of “cool” factor that has made our project a major focal point of the LGBT Center’s programming.

How to celebrate the project and engage the community

- We try to celebrate the project on a regular basis by having programs at least quarterly, changing exhibits at least quarterly, and a quarterly newsletter.
- We’d like to have a web presence that has a lot more content and has some multi-media and interactive components. We hope to add this in the future.
- We do use Facebook to some extent, but I would like to take more advantage of social media

Incorporating oral histories into an online exhibit to help tell a larger narrative

- We have not done this yet, but we want to. Our vision is to create multi-media digital exhibits on various topics that are supported by the oral history stories and the archival document and artifact collections, and tied together with an interpretive narrative. We operate this project on a shoe-string budget and this kind of work will likely cost more than our current resources can support. We are looking into some grant programs to try to get to this next level.

Advantages of Collaboration on an LGBT History Project

- I think collaboration between an established historical archival institution and an LGBT community organization is an excellent partnership that brings the strengths of both organizations together for a common purpose. It is the main reason why we won the J. Franklin Jameson Archival Advocacy Award because this is considered a model the SAA would like more projects like this to emulate.
- LGBT organizations know their community; they have the contacts, they know some of the history themselves and they know who in their community knows more about their history and they know how to ferret it out. They know some of the sites that are important to their history and ways to find more. They know the LGBT organizations that have their own archival documents, and what organizations existed in the past and where the records may be. They are the subject matter experts and can help in evaluating the significance of stories, documents and artifacts to the history of their community.
- Archival and historical organizations have the expertise in evaluating, cataloguing, housing, preserving and creating research finding aids for collections. They have standard documents like deed of gift forms, standards for maintaining the collection; they have good quality storage with environmental controls; and a place to allow researchers access. And they have a mission to preserve and make the collection available in perpetuity.

Challenges of Collaboration on an LGBT History Project

- Knowing how much/how frequently we need to interact.
- Professional staff vs. mostly community volunteers.
- Developing policies for web and other publishing or public display vs. privacy concerns of people whose names or images may appear in the collection.
- The rapid growth of the collection and desire to collect artifacts that may exceed the capacity or standards of the archival institution.
- You need someone to champion the project so it does not become a back-burner item in the mission of both organizations.

Differences in LGBT oral history vs. oral history projects in other communities

- I think the main difference may be in reticence to participate on the part of some individuals because of still being in the closet in some part or all of their life, or in just general desire for more privacy and reluctance to reveal that much about their personal stories. I have actually been surprised that we have been so successful in getting people to participate, open up and not restrict content. I think the recent marriage equality victories have given people more courage to live more openly and to share more of their lives.

How difficult is it working mostly with volunteers

- It is about as easy as herding cats. You cannot depend on volunteers, but in our case we must depend mostly on them. Interns are easier to work with because they have to put in their hours to get credit for their internship and as students they have an interest in learning.

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